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Asheville Is a Dreamy LGBTQ Getaway

LGBTQ | PAUL HENEY | NOVEMBER 14, 2020

7



PHOTO: The hike to Catawba Falls is one of the Asheville area's most scenic. (photo by Paul Heney)

My partner and I have always been equally attracted to the charms of urban life and the call of nature. Subsequently, when we plan a vacation, we're equally likely to choose a big city like San Francisco or Miami or a national park in Montana or Utah. So what a discovery we made with a recent visit to Asheville, N.C.!

Asheville has been getting quite a buzz over the last few years in LGBTQ circles—a dynamic, progressive town nestled in the mountains of western North Carolina. It's been touted as having a great foodie scene, numerous microbreweries, a bevy of charming bed & breakfasts, endless hiking options and a lot of art galleries thrown in for good measure. I was almost worried I'd

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We spent our first two nights here at the perfectly situated [Kimpton Hotel Arras](#), smack in the center of the city. Once one of the city’s least charming high-rises, the former bank building was gutted and completely rebuilt—including adding a lovely new art deco façade—late last year.

Rooms at Arras are plush and comfortable, with a modern, elegant vibe. Our room featured a pleasing gray palette, accented with white stonework to keep the overall mood bright. Views from our 11th-floor room were stunning, with the city laid out before us in front of the not-too-distant green mountains. The property’s main restaurant, Bargello, is locally owned and Mediterranean inspired. Chef Peter Pollay’s menu delighted, with an excellent crab and shrimp ravioli in a creamy leek sauce, butternut squash pizza and a surprising hot chicken sandwich. Don’t miss the brownie sundae dessert here, either!

Other interesting lodging options include The Foundry Hotel Asheville, a few minutes’ walk from the center of downtown, and a myriad of bed & breakfast options. We loved the historic [Reynolds Mansion Bed & Breakfast Inn](#), run by a charming South African couple. The gay-owned [WhiteGate Inn & Cottages](#) and [Abbington Green Bed & Breakfast Inn & Spa](#) are other popular choices.

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I've been to cities ten times the size of [Asheville](#) that didn't have the block after block of interesting shopping and restaurants that this Blue Ridge gem does. Many cities its size have a few stretches, usually in the gayborhood or bohemian section, where there are quirky shops, but Asheville really over-delivers here. From the queer-owned [Asheville Bee Charmer](#) and Firestorm Books & Coffee to the beautifully preserved Grove Arcade and the throwback Mast General Store, there was so much to see and do in every direction.

3. Hiking galore.

The Blue Ridge Parkway runs for almost 500 miles and passes just a few miles east of downtown Asheville, connecting outdoor thrill-seekers with a multitude of hiking opportunities. But you'll find great trails in virtually every direction; our favorite was the easy-to-moderate Catawba Falls trail in the Pisgah National Forest, an easy 25-mile drive to the east.

[Explore Asheville](#) has a fantastic [Hike Finder page](#) that is simple to use. You can filter by difficulty, distance from downtown or length, as well as by scenery—are you looking for waterfalls, wildflowers, scenic views? Plus, year-end visitors enjoy a greatly extended [fall colors](#) season here, due to the wide variety of elevations from the top of the mountains to the downtown area set in a valley. Peak colors start at the highest elevations and gradually work their way down over the course of many weeks.



PHOTO: The Biltmore Estate's gardens offer beauty in every season. (photo by Paul Heney)

4. The Biltmore Estate.

For many visitors to the area, it's synonymous with [Biltmore Estate](#), touted as

dozens of Christmas trees were already being set up and decorated for the season in various rooms of the home.

[Biltmore](#) offers more than the house, though. The 8,000-acre grounds are gorgeous, with formal and informal gardens to wander through, as well as a conservatory. You can get as active as you wish, with horseback riding, hiking, fly fishing and more. And the nearby Antler Hill Village, winery and village hotel allow visitors to shop, imbibe, and overnight at the estate.



PHOTO: The Biltmore Estate, located in Asheville, N.C., is a must-see sight in this part of the country. (photo by Paul Heney)

5. An accepting vibe.

We were warmly accepted everywhere we went in Asheville and saw plenty of other gay couples. We stopped by O. Henry's, the city's oldest gay bar, but due to COVID-19 restrictions, only the small patio area was allowed to be open. The hostess told us that the bar has been open since the 1970s. During normal times, The Underground functions as a club in the back of the facility, with a Saturday night drag show that features four to five queens each week.

6. Food, glorious food.

There was simply not enough time to explore all that this city's [food scene](#) has to offer. Tops here were RoseBees for Hawaiian, El Gallo for modern Mexican, Battery Park Book Exchange for champagne and charcuterie, Wicked Weed Brewing for microbrews, Green Sage for breakfast and [Benne on Eagle](#) for inspired Southern cuisine (reservations highly recommended!). And don't forget to check out French Broad Chocolate Lounge for a sinfully good snack—any time of the day.



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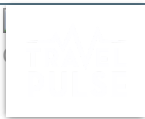
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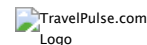
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